



LOCAL HISTORIC DISTRICTS: FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What is a local historic district?

A local historic district is an area in which the majority of residents have decided they want to keep the look and feel of the area by adopting a local preservation ordinance, and then creating a local preservation commission to administer it. This local legislation is one of the best ways to protect the historic character of buildings, streetscapes, and neighborhoods while managing change. A local historic district does not freeze an area in time. Local historic districts are about guiding change and preserving community character as an area grows and evolves over time.

What are the advantages to owning property in a local historic district?

Historic districts encourage reinvestment. When you are part of an historic district, you have some certainty that any new construction or renovation activity will be respectful of the existing character of the community and its architecture. Historic district regulations are meant to provide for thoughtfully managed change, so that if you invest in your building, you are assured that your neighbors will do so with the same values in mind. Real estate agents in many communities use historic district designation as a marketing tool to sell properties, because buyers can be confident that the aspects that make a particular area special and valued will be protected over a period of time.

Local historic districts encourage better design. There is generally a greater sense of cohesion, more innovative use of materials, and greater public appeal within historic districts than in areas without historic designations.

Studies show that districts are a useful tool in stabilizing, even increasing property values and stimulating new investment. A community that values its history and architecture is generally one that is attractive to live and work in.

Finally, and less quantifiable, older buildings give us tangible links with our past.



They tell stories of earlier times and become part of our lives. They are a record of ourselves and our communities. They provide a richness and depth to everyday life that cannot be replicated by new construction and is lost when renovated beyond recognition.

Will my taxes go up?

Property taxes are tied to real estate values. Property taxes for buildings in historic districts are taxed no differently than those outside the district.

My town looks just fine the way it is – what is the value in having a historic district?

As population grows and development pressure increases, more changes will naturally start to happen in a community. Historic districts have been used successfully throughout the country as a means to protect community character, and most vibrant towns have some form of historic design review in place to help manage the change that comes with growth and development pressures. In New Hampshire alone, we have over 60 local historic districts in cities as large as Concord and Somersworth and towns as small as Canaan and Hancock.



Developers known for quality work frequently seek out properties in historic districts. They know up front what the ground rules are; their investment is protected; and there is an open public process already in place for reviewing site and building plans. They also recognize that history is an effective marketing tool. Creating an historic district is a way of singling out the special places within a town or city. It ensures that those unique attributes will remain for future generations, and it provides some predictability and transparency for investors

Any community that has an historic district and survey in process can apply for certified local government status through the DHR and National Park Service. CLGs become part of a state network for sharing information and are able to apply for federal matching grants available only to CLGs. There are also tax advantages to rehabilitating buildings in historic districts for commercial purposes.



Do we really need more regulations? Isn't this just zoning in disguise?

Zoning regulates use; historic districts do not. Local historic districts also do not restrict the sale of the property, require improvements or restoration of the property, require approval for interior changes or alterations, prevent new construction within historic areas, or require approval for ordinary repair or maintenance. Historic districts do provide a certain level of predictability for changes in the area and allow for harmonious streetscapes and neighborhoods.

Who will be making decisions once the district is in place?

Historic districts are administered by either an historic district commission or the heritage commission, and members are appointed in the same manner as other commissions. Ideally, a commission overseeing a district includes people with design experience, such as an architect, planner, landscape architect, and/or builder, as well as those with a demonstrated interest in local history.

The commission will use the historical survey of the properties within the district to guide its decisions. This survey will also provide useful information to property owners on the history and architectural character of their buildings and will also develop design guidelines to assist both applicants and the commission in making decisions.

Is it going to cost me more now to make alterations to my property?

It shouldn't. Historic districts are not adopted to impose hardships on people. Nor do commissions insist that buildings be "restored" or become museum structures. The purpose of a district is to keep as much of the historic fabric as is feasible, and when alterations are necessary, that the underlying historic character of the building is not lost in the process. The goal is to manage change, not prevent it.